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# USA WEEKEND

**Mikhail Baryshnikov**,  
the USA's most famous  
dancer, is on his last legs.  
But he's on a new tour,  
bad knees and all.

# Facing up to 43

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He's rich, he's famous — and he has bad knees. Age and arthritis have changed sexy 'Misha' into a doting dad with a new low-impact dance tour, and a movie this fall.

**M**ikhail Baryshnikov has lived enough drama, glamour and sex to fill a James Bond novel. After fleeing from KGB agents in 1974, he became the world's greatest dancer and a seductive legend. So, when he announces that "life is more interesting now," you have to wonder how that could be.

One clue emerges when the door to his New York loft crashes open. "There's my babies!" he says cheerfully in his enduring Russian accent as 2-year-old Peter bounds in, followed by Alexandra, his 10-year-old daughter with actress Jessica Lange. Lisa Rinehart, his girlfriend and Peter's mother, follows, dragging a stroller. Because of them, he's "happy with my private life. Everything came into focus."

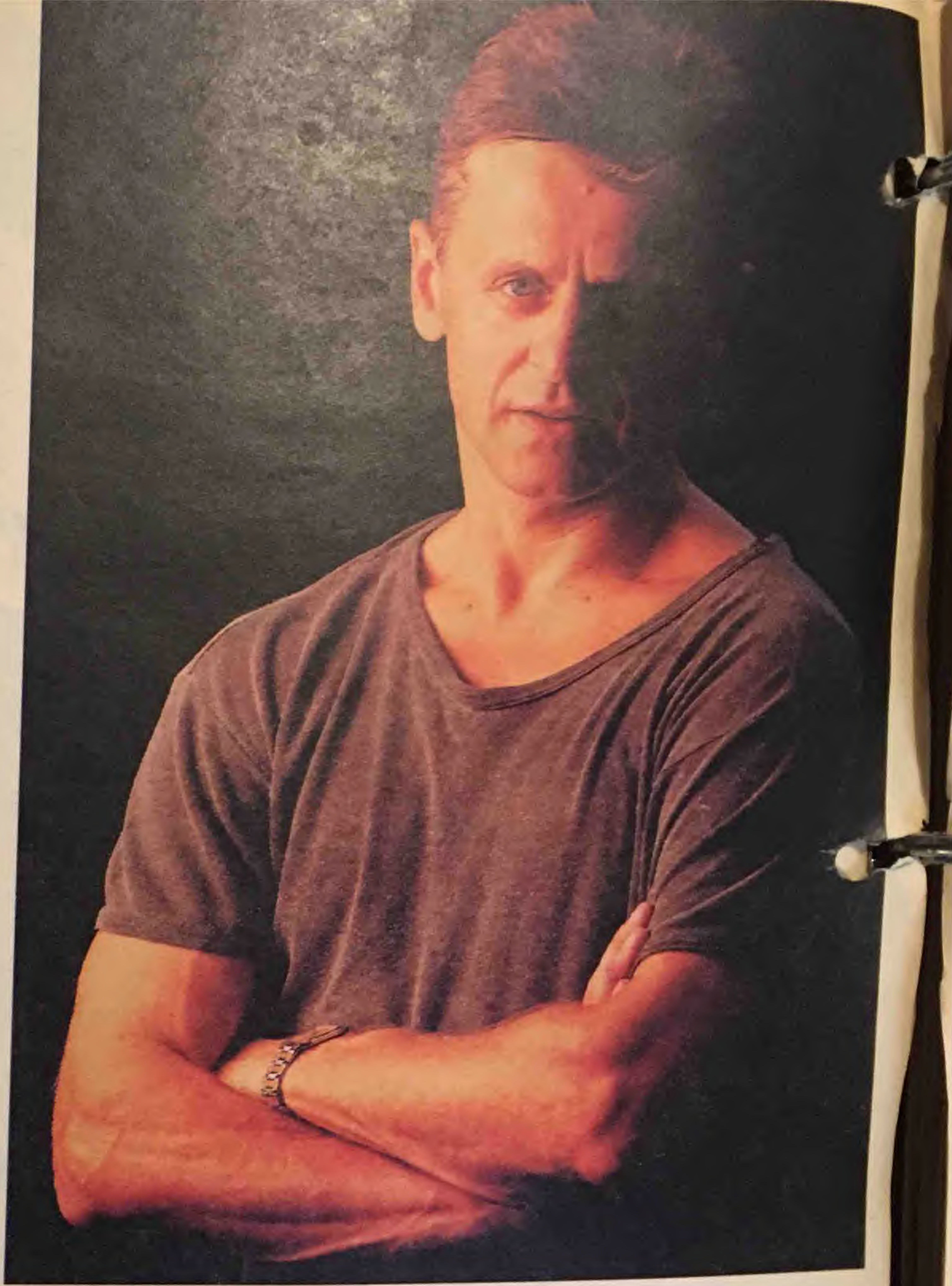
His professional life has resolved as well. An ardent capitalist, he has become a successful entrepreneur: His leotard and perfume businesses pulled in \$36 million

in sales last year. He has two movies in the wings: September's *Company Business*, a film with Gene Hackman that he dislikes so much he refuses to discuss it, and a remake of the German silent movie *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. And, after years of scrutiny as a classical dancer, knee operations and conflicts over his stewardship of the American Ballet Theatre, the company he left in 1989, he has found contentment as a modern dancer. He's performing with the White Oak Dance Project now, on a one-month, 13-city tour — appearing in Milwaukee, Chicago and Cincinnati this weekend, then heading to Philadelphia next week.

He talks about the "really cool show," about the joys of bringing dance to audiences who might never have seen it — or him. But you sense that the main joy is that this group of respected dance veterans does not bill him as the star, just one of the troupe.

At 43, Baryshnikov can't be the high-flying star he was. "I have arthritis pretty much everywhere — spine, knees, ankles," he says, laughing. His left knee, operated on three times, is "up and down."

Because of it, he travels



# HIS LAST DANCE?

Story by Laurie Werner • Photograph by Tom Wolff

with a physical therapist while touring and takes the anti-inflammatory drug Feldene daily. Otherwise, besides getting rest and massages, there's nothing he can do. "If you have injuries in your youth," he says, "you pay for it."

Part of the payment is his new realization that he never can go back to the world that made him famous. "No ballet for me again. I can't." ("That's news to me," says Richard Philp, editor of *Dance Magazine*, when told about that end-of-an-era statement.) Baryshnikov's mind races to explain; his words tangle. Aware that his starring days are over, he says, "I could still be ... in big classical company in character roles, but I choose to do something else."

White Oak co-founder Mark Morris creates choreography that extends Baryshnikov's performing life. "I don't have to dance around the material," Baryshnikov says. "I'm using different set muscles; I don't have to do as much. And I'm having great time. It's new world."

But is he successful? Reaction is mixed. "A ballet dancer whose technique is unraveling because of age and injury is not a modern dancer," the ballet critic for *New York Magazine* declared last fall.

The criticism irritates Baryshnikov. But aging, he insists, does not. And his friends believe he's telling the truth. "Misha doesn't look back," says choreographer Peter Anastos. "Not when he came to the West. Not ever. He has no need for nostalgia."

Anastos also puts a more complimentary spin on Baryshnikov's dancing. "He hasn't diminished; he's just deepened. It's hard for the public to accept this. They think he's a meteor, but meteors burn out. Still, he's an incredible presence."

At home, Baryshnikov does not radiate stardom. He's slight (5-foot-7) and pale, with a smile that makes him look almost goofy. In his Parris Island Marines T-shirt, blue slacks and running shoes, he looks out of place as he walks, catlike, through his

own very elegant living room. The fabric on his antique couch is a delicate yellow Provencal print; on the walls are sketches by Renoir and Cocteau, along with a 17th-century silk wedding dress he brought back from China.

## **'You cannot do Romeo until you're 50. Life has gone on.'**

Beautiful things fill his three homes. He's passionate about the Mercedes-Benz he keeps at his Sneden's Landing house, in the countryside north of New York City.

It is in that rustic house, overlooking the Hudson River, that Baryshnikov is the closest he may ever be to settling down. He didn't live with Lange long after Alexandra — called Shura — was born, but now he shares his home with little Peter and Rinehart, a pixie-ish strawberry blond he met when she was an American Ballet Theatre dancer. (Shura visits from her mother's home in Virginia.) For a fiercely independent man, whose homes have been hotels and jets, it's a reasonably normal existence.

Observers credit Rinehart. "Lisa is the sweetest girl in the world, and it's really been a stabilizing experience for him," Anastos says. "He has to be footloose, to go all over the world. That's his business. But now he has a good home to come home to."

Today, though, the family is in Manhattan, because he has work to do. Shura, a reticent blond beauty with her mother's bone structure and

her father's penetrating, wary blue eyes, is scheduled for a haircut, and Baryshnikov, as a participatory father, will go along. He routinely does things like that — he cooks dinner, changes diapers, tends to Peter when he cries.

When told that fans may have a hard time imagining him doing that, he stiffens. "Why would I not?" His tone turns formal. His eyes, which reflect or lose light as his mood changes, harden. But the clouds pass as Peter runs by; he lifts the boy and kisses the top of his head.

Peter, a dark-eyed blond, breaks free and bangs with abandon on the white grand piano. His mother tries to quiet him; his dad, who plays piano "a bit," is indulgent. "Let him play. You don't want him to say (in mock rage), 'I always wanted to play the piano, but my mother never gave me a chance!'"

Given a 2-year-old's attention span, though, the concert doesn't last long, and the family retreats to a back room. Baryshnikov seems relieved. The children's presence at the interview was an "unfortunate accident," he says.

Nonetheless, his kids are on display, from the large photo of Shura playing violin to the happiness they have injected into his life. Thanks to them, Baryshnikov sinks less often into depression. Particularly during his ABT years, when knee problems accelerated, he descended into weeks of glacial depressions.

Even in the best of times, though, Baryshnikov is known as a difficult person to reach. "He hides a lot of his feelings and emotions," says Taylor Hackford, who directed him in the film *White Nights*. "He's very deep, very Russian, one of the darkest people you could imagine. You have to remember he has the whole process of the defector within him."

The defector keeps things intentionally obscure, answering personal questions elliptically, even friends'. "Misha doesn't want to be interpreted, to be probed," a friend says. "That's why no one really knows him. Not

Lisa, not even Jessica."

Considering his background, it isn't surprising. He grew up in a country filled with distrust, and he witnessed the miserable marriage of his artistic, vivacious mother and cold military father. His mother, after whom he named his daughter, killed herself when Baryshnikov was 11.

Perhaps that pain is the reason he is so elusive. Naturally, he will not say. "Psychological profile," he sniffs. He shakes his head ever so slightly. "Everyone wants to know what's behind the curtain."

He enjoys withholding even everyday details. For instance, he phoned the night of this meeting to answer a few remaining questions. "We just finished our dinner," he said sleepily. "I've been cooking all evening. It was delicious. But (in a voice used for schoolyard taunts) *I'm not going to tell you what we had!*" He laughed with satisfaction.

As much as he squirms to free himself from questions, however, he reluctantly reveals some thoughts. His present life is satisfying because as he's gotten older he's gotten wiser — he's more intimately involved. "You fit more into the place. Your relationship with people gets a certain focus; you become part of someone else's life. You feel more needed."

Yet marriage seems out of the question. "I happily exist in a situation ... my girlfriend, myself and my children," he says tersely.

During his five years with Lange, he wasn't around enough to even be "in a situation." Her solution was to take up with playwright-actor Sam Shepard, an action that Baryshnikov took years to get over. Now, "I speak to her all the time. We're very good friends. She's the mother of my child. I love her dearly." (Lange, filming a movie, was unavailable for comment.)

Because they're on good terms, it isn't inconceivable they could someday co-star in a film — if he decides to put

## **Baryshnikov's business**



*He still loves Jessica Lange, mother of Shura, 10, and won't pose for any family photos.*



*His brand-name perfume and leotard businesses help foot his high-flying lifestyle.*



*He's down on his new movie, but fared well in 'White Nights' ('85), with Isabella Rossellini.*

that part of his career in high gear. Despite his Oscar-nominated debut in *The Turning Point* and good reviews for *White Nights*, films have no priority. All talk of movies is tabled as he plays out the last days of his dance career.

And he doesn't know how much time is left. "I might end next year. I might work couple more years. It depends on the way our project (White Oak) will go. While I can, I want to go onstage and dance."